



Howard County Government News Release

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Howard County warns residents of utilities call scam

ELLICOTT CITY, MD – As colder temperatures begin to blow in across our region, Howard County's Office of Consumer Protection is warning residents to be on the lookout for calls from individuals posing as representatives of local utility companies demanding immediate payment for service. This warning follows an alert issued by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as part of the FCC's new, standing series of consumer alerts to inform, protect and empower consumers.

With this scam, the caller claims to be a representative with the consumer's local gas or electric utility company, stating that immediate payment, often by prepaid debit cards, credit cards or gift cards, is due to ensure the consumer's heating service is not disconnected. Scammers often "spoof" utility company telephone numbers so the consumer's caller ID suggests that the call is from the utility company. After consumers follow instructions via interactive prompts, they are connected to a live "customer service representative" who asks for the access code for a credit, debit or gift card. This information allows the scammer to cash out the card or sell it to a third party.

"If you receive a call warning that your service will be cut off due to an outstanding balance, hang up immediately," said Rebecca Bowman, Administrator of the Office of Consumer Protection. "To verify the legitimacy of the call, contact your utility company using the phone number listed on a recent statement or legitimate website."

The Office of Consumer Affairs also advises:

- Do not answer calls from unknown numbers. Let them go to voicemail;
- No legitimate business will demand payment via gift cards, prepaid debit cards or wire transfer;
- If you are not sure if a caller is legitimate, hang up, look up the company's phone number independently, and use that number to verify the call with the company;

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- If you get a recorded message asking you to hit a phone key to stop getting calls, just hang up. Scammers often use this trick to identify, and then target, live respondents;
- Ask your phone service provider if it offers a robocall blocking service that allows subscribers to block unwanted calls. If not, encourage your provider to start offering a blocking service. Visit the FCC's website for more information and resources on available blocking tools at www.fcc.gov/unwanted-calls.

For more information and/or to report a potential scam, contact the Office of Consumer Protection at 410-313-6420 or email consumer@howardcountymd.gov, or visit the Office's "Scam Alert!" website at www.howardcountymd.gov/Departments/Community-Resources-and-Services/Office-of-Consumer-Protection/Scam-Alerts. The Office of Consumer Protection can help answer questions and forward reports of scams to the appropriate state and federal authorities who work to identify the scammers and take action to stop them.

Residents who have lost money or feel their personal safety is at risk due to a scam should contact the Howard County Police Department's non-emergency phone number at 410-313-2200 to file a report.

Howard County residents who are having trouble paying their utility bills should contact the Community Action Council of Howard County at 410-313-6440 for assistance.

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